ALEXANDER LAMBEVSKI
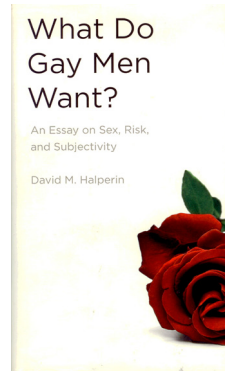
alex@sextures.net

REVIEW ARTICLE

Foucault, Gay Subjectivity and the Sociology of Emotions in Queer Studies[1]

WHAT DO GAY MEN WANT?: AN ESSAY ON SEX, RISK, AND SUBJECTIVITY
David M. Halperin
Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2007

Foucault's killing off psychology

"The entire art of life consists of killing off psychology" declared Foucault in 1981 (Defert and Ewald 1994: 256; Halperin 2007: .4). This epigrammatic statement vividly captures the political and ethical attitude shared by so many lesbians, gay men and other queer scholars and activists of his generation "who, like him, had spent a lifetime struggling against their own sense of psychological deviance" (Halperin 2007: 4), and who spent enormous energy fending off "the unflattering judgments of psychological experts and… [dodging] the constant, perennial accusations of perversion, sickness, [and] abnormality" (Halperin 2007: 5). Legions of gay, lesbian, transsexual and queer scholars had thus very good political reasons to embrace Foucault's attack against the "inordinate authority [of ego and depth psychology, and psychoanalysis] in criminal and judicial matters, legal determination of competency for a range of behaviors, and the promulgation of 'universal human norms' imposed as measures of judgment on us all" (Alcoff 1996: 120).

Foucault critiqued psychology and psychoanalysis as privileged and relatively recent forms of reflexivity, a scientia sexualis which "contrived a map of human sexual practices and categories that could be used to define individual subjectivities, and intervene in them

according to the same old logic of scientific authority and medical emergency" (Mansfield 2000: 111). These sciences of sex invented sexuality "as a way of making subjectivity [particularly queer subjectivities] always and everywhere pathological" (Mansfield 2000: 111). Thus sexuality in our era became infinitely important, a defining, supposedly "most authentic and interior" attribute of our modern subjectivity, "not merely …a site of pleasure and emotion, but … a source of meaning, anxiety and identity" (Mansfield 2000: 111). To inquire into our affective structures and inner motivations according to the analytical protocols established by psychology and psychoanalysis means to monitor and administer ourselves precisely in the ways prescribed by the dominant system of power/ knowledge. For Foucault, the very notion of modern subjectivity as conceived by these sciences of sex was just a pretext on which various systems of social domination leaned in order to govern us effectively.

For Foucault and his queer followers, killing off psychology meant foreclosing all inquiry into the affective structure and inner motivations of modern homosexuals, thus making the world a safer place for queers, since "any feature unique to the inner lives of lesbians and gay men would likely be interpreted as a symptom or expression of pathology" (Halperin 2007: 4).

It is worth noting here very roughly what the benefits and costs of this deliberate queer political strategy to kill off psychology are. Gay and lesbian scholars completely backgrounded gay subjectivity in favour of gay identity as the only politically desirable topic for queer friendly research, fearing that any "disquieting and potentially discreditable details of gay subjectivity" (Halperin 2007: 5) may harm the campaign for lesbian and gay equality. The success of this campaign depended on creating a politically palatable discursive representation of lesbians and gays in order to gain the support from reasonable straight people, mostly progressive liberals and social-democrats, who could be moved to "tolerate [lesbians and gays], or at least not to mistreat them, when one appeals to [the] basic sense of fairness and decency [of the straight majority]" (Halperin 2007: 5). It is for these reasons that the lesbian and gay movement offered a "remarkably plausible and persuasive new definition of homosexuality in political rather than psychological terms" (Halperin 2007: 2).

According to this new understanding, to be homosexual was not a result of a defective psychological development, but a result of belonging to a stigmatised social group. Homosexuality was thus repositioned as a natural and benign sexual variation that has been, nonetheless, an object of intense social hostility, and "irrational prejudice, leading to widespread and unjustified discrimination against gay people" (Halperin 2007: 2). What gay people shared was not a psychological disorder, but a social disqualification, a "long history of savage, even genocidal oppression" (Halperin 2007: 2), similar to the

social degradation suffered by oppressed ethnic groups throughout the world. For the gay and lesbian movement, this history of oppression gave gay people "an immediate political claim to social tolerance, freedom from discrimination, and overall improvement in life chances" (Halperin 2007: 2).

Reinventing homosexuality as a political collective identity meant that lesbians and gay men were no longer social deviants, but normal people similar to "any ethnic or religious group that is socially marked by its perceived difference from regular folks" (Halperin 2007: 2-3). This political strategy has had huge political payoffs as witnessed by the assimilation of mostly middle-class white gays and lesbians into mainstream society and gaining a citizenship status almost equal to those of heterosexuals in most countries of the West (Weeks 1998; Plummer 2001; Seidman 2001; Stychin 2001; Oleksy, 2009). It is no wonder then that any gay scholar daring to investigate gay subjectivity is greeted by politically savvy gays and lesbians with great deal of anxiety and sometimes outright hostility (Farmer 2000).

Gay subjectivity and HIV social research and activism

Foucault's highly original thinking about sexuality has been incredibly influential and instrumental in shaping a new type of queer activism, particularly in the area of HIV/AIDS. However, with the persistence of the phenomenon of so called "barebacking" among a small population of urban gay men in the West, we have come to the point where certain questions Foucault did not want to ask, questions about the inner affective lives and motivations of gay men, have to be asked, bearing in mind his critique of the drive and will to power contained in almost any production of knowledge. The queer refusal to seriously engage with issues of gay subjectivity for fear that the topic is inherently tainted by the disciplining and normalising effects of its privileged psychological and psychoanalytic framing (Halperin 2007: 11), meant that queer scholars did not have an alternative conceptual apparatus sufficiently and substantially developed to compete with psychoanalysis and psychology on the issue of queer subjectivity. Treating gay subjectivity simply as a discursive mirage, a byproduct of the discourses on sexualities that developed in the last 180 or so years, proved to be a liability, rather than an asset when it came to informing gay inflected social inquiry aimed at providing pragmatic and workable solutions for the HIV/AIDS crisis affecting gay men.

Is there a way to reconcile Foucault's general understanding of modern sexual subjectivity with the pressing need to provide a non-normative, non-psychological, non-psychoanalytic framework for thinking about gay male subjectivity detached "from discourses of mental health, the high moral drama of the individual sexual act, the

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dichotomous opposition between rational agency and pathology, and the epidemiology of [sexual] risk" (Halperin 2007: 29)? I believe Foucault himself provides clues about this in his discussion on the ancient male techniques of ethical self-fashioning in *The Use of Pleasure* (1990).

Foucault presented these "techniques of self-fashioning as a historical alternative to, if not quite the antithesis of" (Halperin 2007: 7) to the authoritarian practices of disciplined self-analysis, the modern hermeneutics of the subject, familiar to us from Christian ethics and 'Freudian culture' (Halperin 2007: 7). For Halperin, the differences in the ways individuals appropriate ethical discourses and put them into practice, the differing modes of subjection (*mode d'assujetissement*) as Foucault calls them (Foucault 1990: 7), contain the rudimentary outline of a "possible non-disciplinary hermeneutics of the subject" (Halperin 2007: 7). Rather than "objectivation of the self in a true discourse" (Foucault 2005: 333), so "characteristic both of Christianity and psychology" (Halperin 2007: 7), these techniques of self-fashioning allowed a radically different option: "the subjectivation of a true discourse in a practice and exercise of oneself on oneself" (Foucault 2005: 333). The radical hope of queer politics contained in its killing off psychology is in reactivating a tradition of ethical self-fashioning, that "had never completely died out" (Halperin 2007: 8) in the West, and that consists "not in self-analysis, nor in adherence to norms of proper, healthy functioning, but in 'aesthetics of existence' [Foucault 1988]" (Halperin 2007: 8).

Emotions act as the unexamined, yet fundamentally important, background in Foucault's understanding of ethical self-fashioning. Re-reading *The Use of Pleasure* (Foucault 1990) through the lenses of the sociology of emotions, I am struck by the ongoing implicit presence or reference to emotional struggle, or the "contradictory movements of the soul" as Foucault calls them (1990: 26), involved in the process of appropriating and practicing moral discourses. It is clear to Foucault, as it was clear to the classical Greek philosophers to whom he refers, that the individual's embodying of ethical ideals required strenuous mental control requiring the moulding, moderating (*sophrosyne* and *enkrateia*), and disciplining of one's feelings in order to bring them in line with the behaviour prescribed in these ideals. This emotional struggle is "ethical work (*travail ethique*) that one performs on oneself, not only in order to bring one's conduct into compliance with a given rule, but to attempt to transform oneself into the ethical subject of one's behavior" (Foucault 1990: 27).

The prize for winning this battle over contradictory feelings, the "dominion" over oneself (*basilikos, basileuon heautou*) (Foucault 1990: 81), was the right to rule over others. However, this was far from easy and hence the rewards for pulling it off were so high. Classical Greek philosophers endeavoured to provide a map that would help the ideal

citizens navigate through the perilous waters of their emotions. To me Foucault's techniques of self-fashioning, which are modeled after the ancient Greek and Roman hermeneutics of the self, are also techniques of emotional management (Hochschild 1983/2003) or tools for emotional navigation (Reddy 2001: 118-130), helping the individual chart her way through the confusing flux of needs, desires, laws, customs, obligations, stories, experiences, ethical and aesthetic ideals. To put in other words, the messages about "how should I live a life worth living with others?," a fundamental question preoccupying both classical Greek and late modern political philosophers, come in many incommensurate "codes," "discourses" and "practices." In a few introductory passages on morality and the practice of the self, Foucault comes close to defining a notion of grounded moralities (Plummer 2001: 248), the here and now of how individuals face everyday ethical dilemmas, the way they "comply more or less fully with a standard of conduct, the manner in which they obey or resist an interdiction or a prescription, the manner in which they respect or disregard a set of values" (Foucault 1990: 25).

Talking about morality also in terms of the "real behaviour of individuals in relation to the rules and values that are recommended to them" (Foucault 1990: 25), Foucault acknowledged that free men in ancient Greece and Rome had a choice in how to conduct themselves in relation to the rules, opinions and advice given to them in etho-poetic texts, and that some behaviours were more ethically compelling than others, since they were set up as the sacred objects of the well-ordered and well-governed ideal ancient Greek polis and repeatedly charged with the aura of virtue, nobility and beauty through the formal and informal rituals in which these ideals were transmitted to and practiced by free boys and men at the gymnasium, the agora, the oikos and the amphitheatre.

Foucault quickly loses sight of the potential that these few remarks on morality in *The Use of Pleasure* (1990) contain for a theory of what he, elsewhere, called a microphysics of power (Foucault 1980: 55-62) by exclusively focusing on the ancient male Greek philosophers' ethical prescriptions rather than on how these prescriptions were actually put into practice by various free men in the classical world. However, David Halperin, a leading gay foucaldian scholar, perceptively picks up on these clues from Foucault and examines the central role emotions play in various types of gay ethical self-fashioning, particularly in relation to unprotected gay sex, in his recent brave study titled *What Do Gay Men Want?* (2007).

Foregrounding gay subjectivity through the microsociology of gay emotions

For Halperin, humans, including gay men, have very limited cognitive capacities, and in a time-pressured world of "confusion, uncertainty and stress" (Halperin 2007: 108), people

make decisions by reducing alternatives and avoiding complex decisions by choosing whatever feels best or least worst based on previous emotional experience. How risky sex, through abjection, becomes a thrilling cognitive symbol loaded with great emotional energy (Collins 2004) is Halperin's particular focus. I will paraphrase one of Halperin's main points here in the following way: risky sex as an interaction ritual is a "mechanism of mutually focused emotion and attention" (Collins 2004: 8) that produces a momentarily shared reality between gay men thereby generating solidarity among pariahs and symbols of belonging to an abjected social group.

For Halperin, abjection is one of the underlying structural elements of the affective structure of gay men, whereby "gay subjectivity is divided against itself, formed in stigma, in rejection by others–especially by those whom one desires–and by oneself" (Halperin 2007: 69). Halperin is consistently sociological in his approach to understanding the social operations of abjection and convincingly shows that abjection "does not originate in psychic causes" (Halperin 2007: 69), and that it is a collective gay emotion arising as a consequence of the heterosexist society's collective judgment against gay people, only further exacerbated by the HIV/AIDS crisis (Halperin 2007: 69), and a "dynamic social process constitutive of the subjectivity of gay men" (Halperin 2007: 77).

Abjection is also the gay men's strategic response to their oppression and pathologisation by a society that despises them, a

> socially constituted affect that can intensify the determination to survive, can conduce to sexual inventiveness, and can lead to the creation of various devices for extracting heightened pleasure, and even love, from experiences of pain, fear, rejection, humiliation, contempt, shame, brutality, disgust, or condemnation (Halperin 2007: 93).

By seriously examining the emotional nature of the process of willing or unwilling subjection, and the intentional or unintentional resistance to various discourses of power/knowledge (Foucault 1980), by demonstrating that the relation of oneself to oneself (Foucault 1990) is a site of intense emotional struggle, and by showing how through the self-altering and exploratory effects of emotional expression (Reddy 2001: 128) one can modify the intensity or even the intended effects of a particular system of domination, Halperin provides the first necessary, although still not sufficiently microsociological, steps for building a theory of the social dynamics of the gay microworld, and thus grounds Foucault's techniques of the self and his notion of the microphysics of power (Foucault 1980: 55-62) in the microsocial reality of the here and now of how actual gay men (like Jean Genet, catholic gay writer Marcel Jouhandeau, and gay writer and porn star Scott O'Hara) appropriated or practiced moral and other discourses of power/knowledge.

Halperin provides an exciting opening for a new queer research agenda by seriously tending to the issue of what Foucault called "the contradictory movements of soul" (1990:

26), the emotional struggle involved in how gay men "comply more or less fully with a standard of conduct [prescribed by the hygienic discourses of public health], the manner in which they obey or resist an interdiction or prescription" (Foucault 1990: 25).

However, Halperin's failure to engage with any of the now burgeoning research on emotions taking place in anthropology (Wikan 1990), history (Reddy 2001) and sociology (Barbalet 2002; Turner and Stets 2005), particularly in the field of the microsociology of emotions (Collins 2004; Scheff 1990), deprives him of the great opportunity to use richly developed conceptual toolkits and insights, and thus make a clearer and more straightforward organic connection to the lifeworld of gay men. The spiritualised framing of his analysis of the social roots of gay abjection is too mystifying to be translated into a concrete research agenda or plan for political action, which is crucially needed in the area of HIV social research. As Scheff points out, rarefied and mystifying analysis "without [a clear] organic connection to the lifeworld has had uncertain and only sporadic influence in the struggles of the ruled groups, the working class, students, women, [gay men] and the consumers of professional services" (Scheff 1990: 101).

Given his position as one of the leading figures in a relatively new field of scholarly inquiry that we now designate as gay and lesbian studies, or as Halperin calls it more inclusively queer studies (2002), and given the enormous impact of Foucault on Halperin's work ever since the latter wrote *Saint-Foucault* (1985), it is no exaggeration to say that *What Do Gay Men Want?* is a very important reconceptualisation and renegotiation of "what is (or should be) thinkable under the rubric of 'queer studies'" (Morrison, see back cover of the book) after Foucault. The book represents an extremely nuanced, eloquent and urgent plea for gay scholars to bring the issue of gay subjectivity out of the closet, especially in the light of the new wave of demonization and pathologisation of it in a multitude of scientific and other inquiries, largely "grounded in unexamined [and highly speculative] normative notions about psychological health" (Halperin 2007: 11), offering "explanations" about the increased rate of "unsafe" sex among gay male populations in the West in the last decade.

Halperin's slim book represents a persistent refusal to think the gay male subject through the disciplined and "already familiar and increasingly trite conceptual categories of psychoanalysis" (Halperin 2007: 6), and depth and ego psychology. Instead he passionately argues for "other ways of being able to speak about ourselves, about our experiences, about our emotions, and, in particular, about the subjective life of sex and sexuality" (Halperin 2007: 10).

Notes

1. Shorter and different version of this review article was published first as a peer-reviewed article in the *Foucault: 25 Years On Conference Proceedings*, published by the Centre for Post-Colonial an Globalisation

Studies, University of South Australia, Adelaide, 25 June 2009, http://www.unisa.edu.au/hawkeinstitute/publications/foucault-25-years/lambevski.pdf.

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